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## RUSSIAN LAND REFORM

Nowhere do the laws of economic society show closer resemblances in their effects in different countries than in the evolution of landed property in different parts of the world. These laws always give us land problems as perhaps the deepest and most fundamental of all our economic problems. We Americans do not see their complexity, because we are a new country which came into separate existence at a favorable period in agrarian history. We have land laws which correspond roughly to conditions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and because our agricultural life is still comparatively simple, and is still in the main in harmony with our system of land tenure, we are naïve in our treatment of land problems now that they are beginning to emerge. A good illustration is afforded by the assumption of single taxers, who think that by one single legal measure all our agrarian and other economic difficulties can be solved. But we also see naïveté in the hope cherished by some that a few other simple measures like the development of land credits can solve our land problems.

An illustration of our peculiar situation is afforded by the meaning of the word farm to the ordinary American and as contrasted with the meaning of the corresponding word in the older countries of the world. To the American the word farm calls to mind a single enclosed piece of land adequate in area to support a family, in other words, a consolidated "economic holding." It is doubtful if the corresponding word elsewhere in the world calls a similar picture to the mind of most human beings. Certainly to millions of human beings in Russia, in Germany, and Ireland, the corresponding word would suggest long and narrow strips of land intermingled with strips belonging by right of possession to other cultivators, these strips being sometimes one hundred times as long as they are broad and so small that frequently the average area would not exceed an acre. Furthermore, to the thoughtful, the word would call to mind almost insuperable obstacles in the way of good farming, because to reach the strips belonging to one man's farm it is necessary to cross strips belonging to other men's farms, and the work must proceed in common, making difficult, if not impossible, differentiation and improvement in culture. Enclosure means separating out these pieces of land and consolidating them as far as possible so that each man's holdings may consist of two or three separate pieces, the ideal of a single consolidated holding being impossible of universal attainment.

The present writer has seen this process going on in Ireland and has seen what is almost its close in England, while in Bavaria he has discussed, with the commission having the matter in charge, its progress in that state of the German Empire, where it will still take two or three generations to bring it to completion.

Dr. Wieth-Knudsen, in a work recently published, has made an exhaustive study of the land changes in Russia. In this volume,<sup>1</sup> the importance of which justifies an extended review, the author considers the dissolution of the Russian agricultural village, the *mir*, or, to speak more accurately, the *commune*,<sup>2</sup> which has been taking place under the epoch-making law, the *ukas* of November 9, 1906, and also the law of May 29, 1911. He discusses likewise the enclosure, if we may use the English word, of the peasant holdings, which followed the dissolution of the *mir*. This process in its rough outlines is similar in Russia to the English enclosures and also to enclosures which have taken place and are taking place elsewhere.

The word "enclosure" is an unfortunate one, as is the use of "common fields" in England, both leading to misunderstanding, which Professor Gonner in his *Common Land and Enclosure* truly says is "simply grotesque" (p. 73). While enclosure suggests putting fences around the land, it may be doubted if legally the fencing in of the land has anything to do with enclosure. As a matter of fact, after enclosure in England, the land has been generally fenced, but in many other countries an exactly corresponding change has taken place without fencing. In Epworth, England, the small holdings are not fenced in, but all commonage has been done away with, and doubtless the land is technically enclosed.

In Ireland they speak about stripping the land, and the men

<sup>1</sup> *Bauernfrage und Agrarreform in Russland. Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der nach dem Ukas vom 9. November 1906 und dem Gesetz vom 29. Mai 1911 eingeleiteten Auflösung des Mirs und Auseinandersetzung der bäuerlichen Landanteile*, by K. A. Wieth-Knudsen (Munich; Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker & Humblot, 1913, pp. 260).

<sup>2</sup> The word *mir* is generally used by English writers, but less correctly for a distinction must be made between the terms of "*mir*" (the world) and the "*óbstchina*" (commune).

*Mir* means the representative (democratic republican) government of the village commune.

*Commune* (*óbstchina*) means the village itself (including the government, *mir*, and every other feature of the village); it is a group of the peasant households (families) who own land commonly and cultivate it separately (by households).

who conduct the operation are called stripers, because the scattered holdings are consolidated into stripes or strips, but here again it is impossible generally to give one man one single, consolidated holding.

The German terms are far less liable to lead to misunderstanding than is the English word "enclosure." For example, *Zusammenlegung* means laying together, which is exactly what happens. *Auseinandersetzung und Verkoppelung* means separating and putting together, which is also what happens. In Bavaria, *Flurbereinigung* seems to be the commonly used legal term and the commission having the matter in charge is called *Flurbereinigungskommission*. This is expressive, as it means cleaning up the fields, bringing into order the separate pieces of land, but is less accurately descriptive than the term often used by Wieth-Knudsen, namely, *Auseinandersetzung und Verkoppelung*.

Dr. Wieth-Knudsen gives an illustration of the conditions in a village with the land still unenclosed, the farms consisting of widely scattered and intermingled strips, in his description of the village Pogost in government Kostroma. This is in Plan I, opposite page 82. Perhaps no better illustration could be afforded of the conditions preceding enclosure. Any one looking at this map may see how impossible any excellent agriculture must be under such conditions. In Plan II, opposite page 112, he shows the land of the same village after enclosure. It has not been possible to give every one a farm consisting of one single piece, although many have such farms. In a good many cases, it has been necessary to give to the single owner his farm in two pieces and, in some cases, three different pieces. In a few cases the home has been placed upon the farm, but the village still persists and as a rule the villagers go to their land to work.

There must be a certain pathos in this transformation to many Russians who had looked upon the *mir* as the great institution which was to save Russia from the pauperization and the proletarian disasters which threaten the rest of the civilized world. The *mir* as a small republic was teaching the Russian self-government, and thus, economically and politically, it was looked upon as a peculiar institution, which would prove to be the salvation of Russia. Alas! The *mir* is now disappearing and the cherished hopes which were entertained for it seem to be only utopian aspirations.

The story of the disappearance of the *mir* and of the consequent

transformation in Russian rural life with its effect upon urban development is a remarkable one. The economic evolution of Russia in its agrarian aspects is following the evolution of other countries which are in their economic life older, such as England, Ireland, and Germany. When we see how everywhere common holdings and common cultivation make way for individual holdings and separate private property in land, we are tempted to say that we have to do with natural laws, and can understand easily how this concept of natural laws has had so great an influence in economics; for the social laws with which we are here concerned seem to work almost with the precision of the laws of physics.

We have as a foundation the kind of world in which we live with the limitations of land supply, the natural facts of hunger and of the growth of population, resulting in scarcity of land, migrations of peoples, internal migrations, and emigrations of individuals and groups of individuals, and, finally, the necessities of increasing the yield from land, giving us certain stages in economic and social evolution.

Perhaps Russia is the most instructive of all countries for the student of land problems. Here we find a gigantic transformation, which began in the lifetime of those who do not like to call themselves old men, and which is proceeding on a gigantic scale, making what is going forward in a country like Ireland seem comparatively small. With the thought that we have in Russia something well worth while for the American economist, the present writer made a plan with a German economist to wander up and down the German and Russian frontier in East Prussia in August, 1914. Probably his proposed German comrade is as glad as he is that both were elsewhere at that time.

Dr. Wieth-Knudsen describes in broad outline the history of land tenure and of the peasant class in Russia up to 1913 from the time of the Great Emancipation of the serfs, based upon acts extending from 1858 to 1866, the principal one being the Act of 1861. The emancipation was only the first step in the land changes which have taken place in Russia. Freeing the serfs was a negative act. How were they going to live after freedom? Land was assigned to them, but the assignment was inadequate in extent. Moreover, the assigned land was held in the *mirs* with all the difficulties attending the cultivation of unenclosed fields made up of scattered strips. Again, the land assigned had to be paid for. Favorable conditions were made, the state assuming a great part

of the payments that had to be made to former proprietors and allowing the peasants to pay in instalments covering long periods. Finally came the epoch-making *ukas* of 1906, which was the beginning of the end of the *mir*. The *ukas* was based upon the principle of individual property and individual cultivation of the land. This was accompanied and followed by many measures designed to help the peasants to become successful, independent farmers. It is difficult to think of any measure, which has been suggested in this country, which has not been tried and is not now being tried in Russia. State credit has been abundantly used, and provision has been made for gradual repayments of state advances for land purchase over very long periods, for example, in many cases more than half a century. Great institutions have been formed and assisted by the state, especially peasant banks. Agricultural commissions have been created, and they have in all sorts of ways endeavored to help the farmers and to solve the pressing problems of land tenure. State lands have been made over to the peasants; lands of large proprietors, nobles and others have been bought in order to increase the peasant holdings which still remain too small, it being extremely difficult and in many cases impossible to approach the standard of the Irish economic holding, that is, a holding sufficient to support a family according to the approved standards of living of the farmer in that part of the world where his home is.

There is much dispute about the results achieved, but some things seem clear. As might be expected, we have a differentiation. On the one hand, we have a portion of the peasants forming a strong land-owning class of farmers. These peasants constitute an essential element in any healthy population, being a class economically independent. At the other extreme we have the peasants who have deteriorated economically and constitute the proletariat. Some of these, who could not secure sufficiently large farms or who fail in farming for one reason or another, have gone to the city, a desirable thing in itself and a necessary part of the industrialization of Russia.<sup>3</sup> Still others have emigrated to Siberia, and many of them to their own advantage as well as to the advantage of Russia. But there is great discontent, and there have been upris-

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting picture of "the new commercial middle-class Europeans being turned out at such an astonishing rate by modern industrialism of Russia," see Stephen Graham's new book, *The Way of Martha and the Way of Mary*.

ings of the peasants, because their conditions are so miserable and so different from the hopes they have been led to entertain.

Dr. Wieth-Knudsen, quoting Prince Obolensky (on page 187 of his work), shows that the *mir* still floats before the minds of the peasants as an ideal for the future. They want the nobles and the large landed proprietors to be deprived of their lands by confiscation and to have these added to the peasant holdings. Then they think of the *mir* as a place to which they can return when, because of age or otherwise, economic distress overtakes them. Some of them think of the *mir* in this way, as also some of them think of it as a proper organization of agriculture. Wieth-Knudsen clearly shows that in reactionary proposals, looking to the *mir* as a solution of land problems, there is no hope. It is necessary to go ahead and not backward, and as a remedy for industrial accidents, old age, etc., he suggests social insurance.

The difficulty is that a great economic change has taken place without corresponding human changes. The minds of the masses have not been adjusted to the transformation that is taking place. Education has been altogether inadequate, and preparation otherwise insufficient. What has been going on in Russia is in a part a passage from nature economy to money economy, but the peasants are not sufficiently accustomed to the use of money. The freedom they enjoy to sell their land results often in disaster, as it does in the case of the North American Indians who psychically are not equal to the new conditions. Sometimes the land is sold at very low figures and money characteristically disappears. At times the peasant owns only a small strip, and he receives for it only a very little money, which in many cases is soon lost or squandered. We witness, frequently, phenomena precisely similar to those which followed English land enclosures in the eighteenth century, a process altogether different from that of the grabbing of public lands in our country, although this is the picture too frequently called to mind when enclosures are spoken of.

It is apparent that in many cases certain restrictions upon the alienation of land are a necessary part of land reform. This appears to be the case in the most advanced countries, as well as in Russia. Our author calls attention to restrictions in Denmark, and also speaks about restrictions in France, the aim being in both cases to prevent an undue cutting up of the land into holdings insufficient to support a family. In America, when we speak of restrictions upon sales of land and land holdings, we generally have in mind

excessively large holdings, but in most parts of the world, the fear is rather of excessively small holdings. In Russia, also, there are restrictions upon mortgaging the land, which are found to be a necessary part of land reform. The peasant land, generally speaking, for example, can be mortgaged only when the money received is used for improvements. (See p. 184.)

The information we have about Russian land problems is too meager. Works like those by Simkhovitch and Mackenzie Wallace are too old to give present conditions. Some information is found in the article in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, but it is quite inadequate. The magnum opus of Professor James Mavor on the *Economic History of Russia* may be consulted with profit, but the author does not seem to have succeeded so well in his discussion of Russian land problems as he has in the discussion of other questions. In addition to the work by Wieth-Knudsen, we have a still more recent German work by Preyer, called *Die russische Agrarreform*, which appeared in Jena in 1914, the work by Wieth-Knudsen appearing in 1913.

But the story is excellently told by Wieth-Knudsen in the work under consideration, the preface of which is dated March, 1913, and everything seems to have been at that time brought practically down to date. Wieth-Knudsen is in closer sympathy with the government than are most foreign writers on Russian affairs; and while the reviewer can not speak from personal observation, he is inclined to think from a comparative study that his description, while in its main outlines accurate, is somewhat too optimistic. No doubt a real upward movement has begun and, if the measures already taken are supplemented by other modern measures, including proper education, still more beneficent results will be achieved. Of course, the War has come and must disturb the progress of land reform in Russia, as it does interrupt social reform in all countries. The pity of it! Perhaps this review can not be better closed than by two quotations; the first, the observations upon reading this article of a scholar thoroughly versed in Russian affairs in which he himself has participated; and the second, one taken from Wieth-Knudsen, in which he tells us in broad outlines what he thinks about agrarian progress in Russia.

The first quotation reads as follows:

The non-Russian writers, especially Germans, are usually too optimistic about the recent peasant land reform in Russia. But, beside the reform itself, as such, many other reforms are necessary to make the land reform a success or, at least, less painful, for instance:



(a) The peasant farmer (who has separated his share of land into an individual farm, *i.e.*, privately owned by him) certainly needs more land than was his share in the commune;

(b) More general and more technical education is needed;

(c) More capital is needed in Russia to make the landless peasants workers in other industries;

(d) Such reforms, in turn, require changes in government; for instance, provincial autonomy is needed, so as to make the government elastic—to correspond to economic peculiarities in each province. The power of *zémstvo's* (a sort of provincial self-government in the central Russia) must certainly be increased.

In the second quotation, Wieth-Knudsen expresses himself as follows (page 180):

Every impartial person acquainted with the main purposes of the new Russian agrarian reforms, which have been described in the preceding chapters, would scarcely be able to escape the impression that we are here concerned not only with land reforms which have been planned and carried out in a large way, but that the Russian agrarian laws which have been passed since 1905, are without a parallel in the agrarian history of all countries, both in respect to their significance, so far as principle is concerned, and in respect to their practical execution. To be sure, the excellent effects of the present land reforms upon the farming of the Russian peasant will not at once manifest themselves, and their reaction upon the conditions of agricultural productions in other countries of the world may not be seen for a very long time. It means, however, a total failure to recognize the plain facts, as well as the teachings of land policy, if one denies that we are here concerned with a decided and far-reaching change for the better in Russian economic history, and that in consequence of this change for the better, especially as seen in the extension and still more the capacity of development of the Russian colossus, we are witnessing the first beginnings of a powerful movement of the center of gravity of the European economic system toward the East.

RICHARD T. ELY.

*University of Wisconsin.*